

Views and Reviews in the World of Art



Attendant of Buddha, carved in the period of the Six Dynasties; on view in the Tong-ying Galleries.

ship between artist and art lover, in the Stendallian sense of genuineness, scarcely exists. The extraordinary fashion is now almost universal of buying pictures not because you like them but because you think somebody else likes them. The majority of the people who buy pictures buy them just as they would buy stocks in Wall street and for the same reason—hoping for a rise in values. Collectors who buy without the advice of experts are rare.

This, in my opinion, is an absurd situation. I have no objection to business. I have no objection to rises in value. Quite to the contrary. But business is not the sum total of art. If we are to elevate art to the dignity to which we have elevated business we must give our artists greater chances. We must be more liberal and less prejudiced in our patronage. I have been told that in the pork packing establishments—and rest assured that Europeans know more about our pork packing institutions than they do about our artists—I have been told that in these establishments the directors keep a very constant lookout for young men of talent, particularly young men of ideas and of an inventive turn of mind. The great fear of these immense business concerns is lest they grow stale.

I fail to detect a like perspicacity among the directors of our art institutions, and by art institutions I mean the places where the public takes its art medicine, the academies where the current productions are shown, and the museums where there is a pretence to indicate what is permanently worthy.

I am not overly fond of academies. I am not fond of the adjective "academic," which now signifies in the public mind "following the form rather than the spirit." I think I am less fond of academies since I became an art critic than I used to be, for now I have to go to them. I feel quite sad to-day, for instance, because I know that to-morrow in New York I must attend the varnishing day of our spring academy. Coming events cast their shadows before with a vengeance, and I have had so many humiliating experiences at our academies during the last few years that now I am in a chronic

state of fearing the worst. I stay my fears this time with the optimistic reflection that this year's academy cannot be the worst, for last fall's academy was that. So sad an aggregation of futile pictures I suppose was never before assembled in the world's history. Kenyon Cox's "Tradition" was the best thing in the show. I believe it is now adorning your academy. If that was our best you may fancy what our worst was.

Of course no intelligent person supposes for an instant that all the pictures in an academy exhibition must be of the first order, nor blames an academy because most of the pictures are mediocre. Great pictures are not so plentifully produced as blackberries in June. It is the undue emphasis that the academies place upon feeble pictures that causes the mischief. The prize awards in the annual shows in New York have been a source of scandal for many years, and new artists who show a capacity to think for themselves and have traces of originality have been so systematically rejected by the academy juries that now the best of our new people seldom attempt to get before the public in that way, but get famous as best they may in the dealers' galleries on Fifth avenue. The cases of Arthur B. Davies and George Luks are probably well known to all of you, but they are by no means the only ones.

There are half a dozen young men at present in New York whose abilities as painters are such that their performances would get them honors in almost any capital but ours, and there are at least thirty in whom our academies and museums ought to be interested but are not. By the time these new people become independent of the institutions, either by having become rich or by dying, then the institutions become aware of them. In other words, we have no institutions to foster public taste—the institutions follow the public taste, and a long way after.

The explanation of this unpractical state of affairs is simple, and of course you know it already. Real geniuses such as Rembrandt, Whistler, Goya, Blake, are the last people in the world to run the affairs of an institution. Why, Rembrandt couldn't run his own affairs and died in

poverty. So it follows naturally, as water runs down hill, that artists who have more business ability than taste drift into the management.

If you think I speak with rancor you should read what William Hazlitt wrote on the same subject in his essay "On Corporate Bodies." It will, I think, make your hair curl. Here is a sample passage: "A Royal Academy is a kind of hospital and infirmary for the obliquities of taste and ingenuity—a receptacle where enthusiasm and originality stop and stagnate and spread their influence no further, instead of being a school for genius or a temple built to fame. The generality of those who wiggle or fawn or beg their way to a seat there live on their certificate of merit to a good old age, and are seldom heard of afterward," and so on.

I don't wish to go myself too deeply into the shortcomings of the academic system, for I feel that it will be in single control of the situation for only a short time longer. In New York we are to try the experiment of an independent exhibition, without prizes and without juries, for the first time. I advise you to watch it, and if possible to imitate it, for if it is managed correctly it can assist young artists as greatly as did the Societe des Independants in Paris, which, as you know, has been responsible for most of the world's recent art history.

The academies, however, refuse to believe that there is any recent art history. They think nothing has happened since Manet and Monet. They are in the curious position of insisting that time shall stop with the very impressionists who had such difficulty a generation or so ago, insisting that time should not stop with the Bouguereau school. I presume the cubists when they gain the fort will be just as severe upon the new school that shall come along.

Modern Experiments of Young Artists

Since the astonishing and revolutionary exhibition of modern art in the Lexington Armory of New York some years ago one has heard so much of cubists, futurists, synchronists, &c., that it is now no longer possible to say anything but platitudes about it. Everything that can be said has been said. The only thing that you probably want to know of me is whether I am for them or against. I hasten to reply that I am for them.

I see nothing but good that can come from our giving the new people a fair chance. Considering the attitude of the general public toward art, of which I have spoken, I think cubism and its attendant manifestations will have an educational effect. It is not the panacea that I would have invented myself were I casting about for a remedy for our lack of vision as a people, but since it has come I begin to see how it may benefit us.

Now in regard to the various divisions of modern art, such as cubism, futurism, &c., I don't waste any brain tissue trying to classify or define them. I leave that to people with a tabulating turn of mind. With me, I confront each of the new artists and enjoy them or am bored by them, just as I am with artists in other schools. I reject, I am afraid, more than I accept, but I accept enough to feel sorry for people who have missed some of my fine new artistic acquaintances.

In the new turn that art expression has taken since the discovery of Cezanne's greatness there has been a great deal of study given to "dynamics," to that mysterious thing known as the fourth dimension, and all these various "isms" perhaps have a value in starting artists off on that unknown road that leads to the discovery of the thing that is the most important for an artist to discover, namely, himself, but by far the most general, and to me the most important trait, is the effort to curtail the subject in art.

Paradoxical as it may sound, I believe that the more the subject is curtailed for the portion of the public that is stupid on the subject of art the more it is expanded for the artist himself. I will explain: When dull people are brought face to face with a really great work of art such as the "Maids of Honor," by Velasquez, or the "Card Players" of Cezanne, it is doubtful if they obtain the faintest hint from these pictures of the thing that drives an artist wild with enthusiasm—the thing in them which for want of a better term we may call the peculiar game that the artist has been playing.

I remember once asking a friend of mine, a musician, what was the thing es-

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